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ABSTRACT

It is suggested that Chinese students in China and Chinese Americans have difficulty learning to read in English due to native language interference and to cultural traits and thinking patterns. Reading in English requires overcoming some psychological barriers. A chart outlines the different ways in which a Chinese student would read the same article in Chinese as in English, including such elements as sitting attitude, facial expression, use of hands, initial reading strategy, psychological aim, reading style (browsing/skimming vs. word-by-word reading), attention given to new words, tempo, and overall comprehension. The Chinese student, lacking cultural background knowledge, would pay more attention to specific words and structures rather than think and infer actively. In addition, he would prefer and expect a transmission model rather than an interpretive model of reading instruction. To address these culturally-based traits, it is recommended that English second language instruction should include development of non-linguistic competence and both intensive and extensive reading strategies, as well as linguistic competence. (MSE)

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English Reading: An Analysis of Chinese Students' Cultural Assumptions and Psychological Characteristics

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Introduction

English, the fantastic language, is widely used throughout the world, its importance as an international language being felt in many countries. More than half of the publications in the world are in English. According to Kachru (1990), the last four decades have been the decades of English. In his article entitled "World Englishes and Applied Linguistics", Kachru pointed out that "English has acquired unprecedented sociological and ideological dimensions. It is now well-recognized that in linguistic history no language has touched the lives of so many people, in so many cultures and continents, in so many functional roles, and with so much prestige, as has the English language since the 1930s(Kachru, 1990, p5).

At present, English has become the main foreign language

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taught in China. The establishment of diplomatic relations with the United States and its more open stand toward the outside world have led to nationwide interest in the study of English (Wong, 1988). It is estimated that about 500 million students are studying English in China (Hou, 1987). In middle schools and high schools, Eng lish has again been selected as one of the three major subjects along with Chinese and Mathematics. A new program of English instruction in the elementary schools has been worked out by the Ministry of Education, which has stipulated precisely the goals and objectives, the language requirements for each grade, the time allotment and teaching methodology. English is now a requirement of entrance examination for colleges and universities (Tang, 1983).

Background Information

Chinese have been crazy about learning English for years. Television courses, radio lessons, part-time or night schools have offered a variety of educational opportunities for people to learn English or further their education. The CCTV (China

Central Television), for example, has been offering a series of English programs for beginners, intermediate learners, English teachers and even children.

As far as English reading is concerned, in spite of the fact that it is given priority among the language skills in Chinese schools, the teaching of reading is by and large unsatisfactory. Students of middle schools do not really know how to read. They may have learned all the basic structures in English and acquired a large number of vocabulary during their middle school years. However, when they read, they read word by word, making fine analyses of structures, consulting the dictionary constantly, and doing translation all the time, either mentally or in written form. They are deciphering instead of reading.

What about the language situation of Chinese Americans right here in the United States? Johnson once wrote: "The Chinese-Americans are a notably unassimilated culture. It is not unusual in San Francisco to find fourth- or fifth-

generation American-born Chinese who speak no English" (Mckay and Wong, p193). Wong(1988) suggested that any account of the Chinese American language situation must be directed by an understanding of the sociohistorical context in which the two languages, Chinese and English are used.

Also, while discussing the question of teaching English reading to Chinese students, we should take into consideration the cultural assumptions which influence the Chinese students in terms of their attitudes toward reading, traditional testing methods, and cultural expectations concerning literature (Field, 1984). Chinese people have a great respect for education and learning (Scovel, 1983) as well as enormous respect for written words (Maley, 1983), both of which are reflected in the traditional way of teaching in China.

Literature Review

From the above discussion we can see that both Chinese students in China and Chinese Americans in the United States have difficulties learning English for various reasons. First,

it is widely accepted that Chinese language, which is so different from English, interferes with the Chinese students' learning of English (wong, 1988). Second, Chinese culture and Chinese students' thinking patterns have a great impact on their English learning process. Kaplan(1966) has suggested that Chinese learners of English tend to use a "cultural thought pattern" favoring circularity and indirection as opposed to English linearity.

It is generally agreed that the teaching of English reading in China has not been very successful. It is, of course, not because Chinese students are slow or unable to learn reading, but because they have never been properly taught how to read in English. To them, reading aloud is reading, doing translation is reading, and analyzing sentences is also reading.

Frank Smith(1988, p2) said that "reading and learning to read are essentially meaningful activities; that they are not passive and mechanical but purposeful and rational, dependent

on the prior knowledge and expectations of the reader(or hearer). Reading is a matter of making sense of written language rather than decoding print to sound." The objectives of reading are not to read for vocabulary or structures, but to read for information, experience, enjoyment and meaning. For this reason, teachers should not only teach the students to decode meaning, either lexical, or syntactic, from the printed page, but train them to read quickly and effectively, and help develop their ability to extract something of specific interest to them and to read with ease and confidence.

Research in the field of reading has focused on the interaction between the language's linguistic system and the reader's psychological make-up. According to Haulman and Adams (1983), this psycholinguistic perspective considers the reading process as a selection of graphic, syntactic, and semantic cues from which readers can guess and test the acceptability of the guesses against experience, knowledge of the language, and thought development. Instead of simple letter-by-letter, word-by-word decoding, reading is considered as a "psycholin-

guistic guessing game... (involving)... an interaction between thought and language" (Goodman, 1970, p260).

Reading in English, for the Chinese students, indeed means overcoming some psychological barriers. Wang (1991,p56) in his paper entitled "Psychological Barriers and Background Knowledge in English Reading" talked about the psychological barriers the Chinese students have in English reading which are shown on Table I (See next page).

In analysing Table I, we realize that Chinese students behave and respond differently while reading an article written in English as they do while reading the same article written in Chinese, thus proving that the different manner between reading Chinese and reading English results from different reading psychology.

As for Chinese, the students face those characters which they have been familar with when they were very young. Consequently, they are able to guess the content by glancing at the title. While reading, they can enjoy and criticize

Table I

Language Performance / Item	Chinese	English
Sitting Attitude	Relaxed, Casual	Nervous, Affected
Facial Expression	Relaxed, Natural	Nervous, Serious
Hands	On books without additional behavior	Scratching while reading
First response of psychology	Read the title and guess the content	If there are new words and how difficult they will be
Psychological aim	Get the basic content, global plot and think actively	Focusing on new words, trying to understand every word and sentence
Manner	Browsing and skimming through	Word by word, sentence by sentence, not omitting any line
New words	Paying little attention to and care less about them	Underlining new words and looking up the dictionary
Tempo	600-900 words/pm	100-300 words/pm
Result	Able to tell the basic content and personal opinion	Able to tell one or two details but unable to have a global impression on the basic content
P.S.	Reading once	Reading once

the article at will, accepting or rejecting the views in the article, showing sympathy or hatred to the characters of the story, thus being in a position to actively think and participate. It is this healthy reading psychology, which comes from the rich backgroud knowledge the students have, that enables them to read easily and effectively.

On the contrary, the Chinese students are unable to have such a good psychology while reading English. They are worried about new words, looking them up in the dictionary constantly. They pay too much attention to words and structures instead of thinking and inferring actively. This passive reading psychology results from the lack of background knowledge.

Thus, the aim of foreign language teaching is not just to teach the learners how to master the correct ways of expressions in the target language and how to express what has already in their mind, but to enable them to acquire a set of social cultural knowledge that is different from their own (Yang, 1991). It has been agreed among foreign language tea-

chers that teaching a language is not enough in itself and the background knowledge is absolutely indispensable (Morgan, 1993). According to Byram(1989), there has been concern and interest that this background knowledge should contribute more meaning fully to students' understanding and acceptance of different cultures.

Rivers pointed out in 1964 that "without understanding of that culture, the meaning of words can never be understood. The meaning which the word of a language has for the native speakers can be learnt only in a matrix of allusions to the culture of the people who speak that language (Rivers, 1964, p134). Words such as "rainchecks", "plastic money", "food stamps", "freeze" are very difficult for Chinese students to understand. Therefore, truely learning of the language must go hand in hand with an understanding of the cultural setting in which the target language is used.

Chinese students' learning strategies are built up by their cultural assumptions and by the background information

that they bring to the material (Field, 1984). Their reading strategies are influenced by a traditional attitude towards learning and teaching and by traditional methods of learning: remembering each word without a thorough understanding of the general idea of the work (Field, 1984).

Chinese students always have a high respect for education and learning. Janene Scovel(1983) insisted that "the discipline to memorize and learn by rote is believed to be an essential characteristic necessary for successful learning in China (Scovel, 1983, p106). Chinese students have attached great importance to memorization of the texts. In a way, they may transfer their traditional study method to the learning of English. The Chinese students focused on short passages and recited them in early morning, thus trying to commit them to memory.

Besides, Chinese students are accustomed to absorbing the materials covered and seldom ask the professor the questions. Critical thinking and independent study are not em-

phasized at any level of schooling (Yao, 1983). They are usually very shy, preferring to be good listeners rather than talkers. When they have questions about course assignments, they seldom ask the teacher to explain. Instead, they either figure the problem out for themselves or get the answer from classmates (Yao, 1983). Basically, Chinese students are tested on what the instructor teaches.

Monica Wyatt and Michael Pickle (1993), two doctoral students at the University of Georgia, have done a study of teachers' beliefs about the Interpretation View and the Transmission View in reading. According to them(1993), teachers with an Interpretation View consider knowledge as something that can be interpreted by the learner and believe that knowledge is not unchangeable. Teachers with this kind of view tend to connect new information to the students' past experiences, enabling the students to interpret knowledge themselves. The students would eagerly seek their own knowledge through projects assigned to them by the teachers rather than memorize facts.

In the Transmission view, according to Wyatt and Pickle (1993), teachers view knowledge as something existing for a long time and that can be memorized by the students. Transmission teachers believe that knowledge is fixed and does not change with the individual. As a result, they believe in lectures, seeing it as the most efficient method of teaching.

For Chinese students, they prefer the Transmission View because they are accustomed to passive learning. That is to say, they have been passively taking in the knowledge which the teachers are imparting to them in the classroom.

Conclusion and Recommendation

In conclusion, we have realized that Chinese students approach English reading in different ways and with various psychological characteristics. They lack the background knowledge of the target language and decipher the code instead of reading for meaning. They prefer the Transmission View of teaching in reading rather than the Interpretation View in reading. This observation is in agreement with

Field's conclusion(1984, p11) that "Chinese students' reading strategies are shaped by their cultural assumptions and by the background information (or lack of it) that they bring to the material about the people and situations. But most improtant, their reading strategies are influenced by traditional methods of reading which have led to investigating each word without always understanding the general concepts of the work."

According to Jackson(1993/94), current American in-service training on teaching diverse student populations has not focused on specific methods. Teachers need ways to recognize and capitalize on students' differing strengths. Baruth and Manning (1992) believe that good teachers in a multicultural situation should have appropriate knowledge, attitudes, and skills. Educational research demonstrates that instructional strategies provide a more appropriate cultural match between instructional styles and learning style for some minority students and result in improved learning(Little Soldier, 1989; Slavin, 1987).

To remedy the situation, the following strategies for Chinese students in learning reading in English are recommended:

1. The Development of Linguistic Competence

A speaker who knows the syntactic rules of a language is said to have linguistic competence. This is the foundation for communication. The students are supposed to have a large vocabulary and to understand the structure of the target language.

2. The Development of Non-linguistic Competence

In this regard, cognitive ability, cultural and background knowledge should be emphasized. The students must be trained to have inferencing ability in order to find out the point of view, the evidence and the theme of an article or a story. Also, Chinese students often come into this dilema: while understanding every word in the article, they still have the difficulty figuring out what the author is talking about. The reason is that different nations have different cultures. These cultural differences will have impact on the

usage of the language. Therefore, Chinese students should be given the chance to learn the cultural background knowledge.

3. The teaching of Intensive Reading

This approach seems very popular in China even though it is questioned by some American scholars(e.g. Field,1984).

Intensive reading combines text learning with language study and some oral practice. In intensive reading lessons, teachers concentrate the students' attention on the reading passage by asking them questions about the text, analyzing different structures, explaining idiomatic expressions, doing word study and, at the advanced level, discussing the organization and style of different types of writing.

4. The Teaching of Extensive Reading

Extensive reading has two objectives: 1) reading for content and 2) learning reading skills through reading. In extensive reading lessons, teachers try every means to get the students to read quickly and widely, and to train them

to read independently. They motivate the students by introducing the reading materials, giving them Background knowledge, discussing problems of common interest. They assign and check outside-class reading; and what is more, they give students training in effective reading skills like prereading, skimming, and scanning, etc..

Thus, the best approach to teach Chinese students to read in English is through the "common sense" method by which we mean it makes sense to them linguistically, psychologically aswell as culturally.

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